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ABSTRACT

A program training model used at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to prepare special education graduate and undergraduate students to work with paraprofessionals is described. Topics addressed include the following: (1) improvement of instruction and services to handicapped students through use of paraprofessionals; (2) significant role of paraprofessionals in delivery of instructional activities; (3) role of the special educator as instructional manager; (4) need for adequate preservice, inservice, and on-the-job training for paraprofessionals; (5) planning and evaluation of paraprofessional performance; (6) responsibility of the teacher for instructional outcomes; (7) need for preservice and inservice teacher training to help teachers use paraprofessionals effectively; (8) role of the teacher in contributing to policies concerning paraprofessionals; (9) need for within-school programs and policies to allow for regular and systematic communication with and supervision of paraprofessionals; (10) individual school policies regarding deployment of paraprofessionals. Undergraduate and graduate teacher training competencies for working with paraprofessionals are outlined, as well as the program's training methodology, practicum activities, supportive instructional materials, and evaluation of student performance. (JW)

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# What Teachers Need to Know about Using Paraprofessionals: Higher Education's Role

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## What Teachers Need to Know about Using Paraprofessionals: Higher Education's Role

The preparation of teachers to supervise and appropriately utilize paraprofessionals is an important and neglected issue confronting teacher educators in special education. Although paraprofessionals are widely used in special education programs, a significant proportion of teacher training programs do not address skills necessary to make their use effective. This paper describes the current training model utilized at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to prepare special education teachers at the undergraduate and graduate levels to work with paraprofessionals. Initially, a number of assumptions about paraprofessionals, the training of paraprofessionals, special education teacher roles, and the supervision and evaluation of paraprofessionals are discussed. These assumptions form a rationale and philosophical basis for both program competencies and delivery methods. Student competencies and the delivery model utilized to incorporate the skills in the teacher training curriculum are then outlined.

### Program Assumptions

Ten assumptions serve as the basis for the program training competencies for special education personnel who work with paraprofessionals. These assumptions are briefly discussed in the next section.

**1. Primary benefit of paraprofessional use in special education is the improvement of instruction and services to handicapped students.**

The utilization of paraprofessionals in special education programs allows for increased individualization, increased material development, more creative planning, and more effective instruction (Cruickshank & Haring, 1957). These aspects of special education programs are the core of what makes special education programs "special." Use of paraprofessionals in special education programs is an effective means of providing services to students with handicaps. The decision to use paraprofessionals should be based

on the improvement of services to handicapped children rather than on the reduction of cost of program delivery.

**2. Paraprofessionals continue to play a significant role in the delivery of instructional activities to handicapped students.**

The number of paraprofessionals used in special education programs has increased from fewer than 30,000 in 1973 to 150,000 in 1982 (Pickett, 1984). Concomitantly, the role of paraprofessionals in special education has evolved from being clerical to primarily instructional in nature (Esbensen, 1966). Assessment of roles in area programs indicated paraprofessionals spent from 60 to 80 percent of their time in individual and group instruction (Vasa, Steckelberg, & Ronning, 1982; Steckelberg and Vasa 1986). The current structure, supervision, and training of paraprofessionals often does not reflect this significantly changed role.

**3. Special education teachers serve as instructional managers in the schools.**

The special education teacher's role is changing from being primarily one of instructional delivery to also include classroom management with responsibilities in the supervision of paraprofessionals and interaction with outside school agencies and parents. Esbensen (1966) states, "...the distinguishing characteristic of the qualified teacher is his [her] ability to analyze the instructional needs of his [her] students and to prescribe the elements of formal schooling that will best meet those needs." He further elaborates that teaching should not be confused with producing and presenting information for students. Boomer (1980) reports that the teachers' role is expanding to include planning and organizing education, managing resources such as parents and paraprofessionals, establishing program goals, and coordinating resources to reach goals. Pickett (1986) discusses the changing roles of the special education teacher and cites as duties: collecting and interpreting data about student performance; assessing the developmental level of each student; participating in the preparation of the individual education plan; developing

instructional objectives and instructional programs for each student; implementing the instructional program along with paraprofessionals and other professional personnel; evaluating the effectiveness of the program; involving parents in all aspects of their child's education; and coordinating and supervising the work of paraprofessionals and other support staff. These changing roles require teacher preparation programs to recognize additional training needs of special education personnel.

**4. Adequate preservice, inservice, and on-the-job training protects students and maximizes the effectiveness of paraprofessionals.**

Paraprofessionals must be given guidelines for performance through systematic training prior to working with students and in conjunction with performing duties. Sills (1957) notes that ambiguity of programs and operations for the "untrained" facilitates the "process of selective perceptions" by the paraprofessional. The process of training new paraprofessionals should not be designed to prepare "junior" professionals but to recognize that the paraprofessional play a unique role in the delivery of instruction.

**5. On-the-job training requires planning and evaluation of paraprofessionals' performance.**

The primary vehicle for instructing paraprofessionals is on-the-job training. This training provides skills related specifically to the needs in one setting and can be accomplished simultaneously while providing services to students. On-the-job training, however, needs to have explicitly identified goals, planned activities, and systematic feedback and evaluation to be considered *training*. Situations in which the paraprofessional learns only by observing the teacher in an unstructured setting do not provide an adequate base of knowledge for the paraprofessional or provide the necessary protection for students and their parents.

Well planned and evaluated on-the-job training is a significant part of the teacher's responsibility in supervising the paraprofessional. Documentation of this training provides assurances to students and parents regarding the quality of the program.

**6. The instructional outcomes in special education programs are the responsibility of the teacher not the paraprofessional.**

A distinguishing characteristic between the roles of teacher and the paraprofessional is that the major decisions related to the learning of the student are made by the teacher. Teacher roles include assessment of student needs, development of a learning program, management of resources and evaluation of outcomes. The responsibility for the instructional program rests solely with the teacher regardless of the qualifications of the person hired as a paraprofessional. Teacher training programs must continue to address these decision making roles and differentiate professional from paraprofessional roles.

**7. Teachers require both preservice and inservice training to utilize paraprofessionals effectively.**

Teachers are often asked to supervise one or more paraprofessionals without having received training. Walter (1983) suggests that without training teachers may not utilize paraprofessionals effectively or improve student performance. Two studies conducted in Nebraska, indicate that teachers receive minimal training regarding the use of paraprofessionals. In 1982, only 14% of surveyed special education teacher reported receiving training, yet 82% felt that such training was necessary (Vasa, Steckelberg, & Ronning, 1982). In a 1986 study, 17% of special education teachers reported having preservice training regarding the use of paraprofessionals. Average amounts of preservice training were 2.5 hours for teachers serving in severely handicapped programs, .17 hours for those in moderately handicapped programs and .20 hours for those in mildly handicapped programs. Inservice training for teachers was correspondingly low, averaging .75 hours of training per teacher concerning the use of paraprofessionals.

Recognizing the extent of paraprofessional use and the important expanded roles teachers play in their effective use, teacher training programs should address the needs of special education teachers in working with paraprofessionals. Boomer (1980) suggests that teachers must possess specific skills in: interviewing and selecting, orienting,

supervising, and evaluating the paraprofessionals. Pickett (1986) has identified a series of managerial concerns and functions addressed by the teacher in supervising paraprofessionals. These include: goal setting for the paraprofessional, planning and organization, communicating with support staff, directing and delegating, problem solving, assessing and evaluating on-the-job performance, and on-the-job training. White (1984) identifies the following as new skills required of the teacher: the teacher must learn to become effective instructors of adult partners, develop consumer relations and interdisciplinary team skills, develop competence in adult personnel management and instruction, and develop an awareness of appropriate professional roles.

**8. Teachers play a significant role in contributing to policies concerning paraprofessionals use, selection, assignment, training, supervision, and evaluation.**

Since teachers work most directly with paraprofessionals, their input into school policy is important in establishing effective programs. Teachers should be trained in decision-making, legal restrictions in the utilization of paraprofessionals and ethical practices. These skills enhance the professional foundations of teachers enabling them to contribute to a policy-making team.

When the teacher plays an active part on the policy-making team, policy can easily be interpreted into classroom application. Inservice sessions may be conducted by the teacher to disseminate information in regard to the administrative changes. In addition, teachers should play a major role in the selection and assignment of paraprofessionals, inservice training, and evaluation of paraprofessionals.

**9. Special education programs must be organized to allow for necessary regular and systematic communication and supervision.**

School policies which facilitate the use of paraprofessionals in instructional roles often do not exist. A common complaint of teachers and paraprofessionals participating in inservice training is that paraprofessionals are scheduled to arrive with the children and

leave when they leave, affording no time for coordination of activities with the teacher. Teachers' and paraprofessionals' schedules need to reflect adequate time for shared planning time or review of student or paraprofessional performance. School policies should be updated to recognize the substantial roles played by the paraprofessional and to facilitate teacher supervision. Teachers should take a more active part in promoting and establishing these policies and procedures. Specific supervision and evaluation procedures established by the teacher and the school provide for improved management and accountability.

**10. Paraprofessional programs are centered at the local educational agency level. Individual schools should develop specific policies regarding their deployment.**

One of the advantages of paraprofessional use is the flexibility afforded to special education programs. Local personnel can be included in the special education program and used in a variety of differing ways to assist handicapped children. Protection of students from inadequate and inappropriate use of paraprofessionals and poor instruction is also important. One solution to this dilemma is to encourage local educational agencies to develop written policies which establish explicit guidelines for the teachers and paraprofessionals roles, training, supervision and evaluation explicit. These policies, however, are often neglected by school programs. In the 1982 study (Vasa, Steckelberg, & Ronning, 1982), only 50% of administrators, 48% of teachers and 39% of paraprofessionals reported that their school has written job descriptions for paraprofessionals. Teacher training programs should highlight the importance of these polices for the protection of students and to insure the quality of services provided.

## Training Competencies

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln teacher training competencies related to the use of paraprofessionals evolved from the program assumptions in conjunction with a needs assessment of teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals obtained through a study conducted by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (Vasa, Steckelberg, & Ronning, 1982). These competencies have been refined after field testing of the training program. At the undergraduate level, training competencies are focused on developing an awareness of the important issues related to paraprofessional use. At the graduate level, the competencies are designed to produce a teacher who will take an active role in the development and improvement of the paraprofessional programs in special education.

**Undergraduate Trainee Competencies**. Program competencies for undergraduate students are designed to increase their skills in working with special education paraprofessionals. Students completing the training program will be able to:

1. describe the rationale for the utilization of paraprofessionals in special education;
2. describe and define the various roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals in special education;
3. describe the roles of teachers in special education in relationship to the utilization of paraprofessionals;
4. describe the importance and advantages of differentiated staffing in the use of the teacher/paraprofessional team in providing improved educational services;
5. describe legal and ethical constraints on the use of paraprofessionals and methods for insuring that paraprofessionals meet legal and ethical considerations;
6. describe the teacher's roles as supervisor of a paraprofessional;
7. describe ways the teacher as a supervisor can improve communication with the paraprofessional;
8. identify methods for integration of the paraprofessional into the classroom setting;

9. describe a conference format and explain what key elements are necessary for a good conference to occur;
10. identify methods for evaluating the performance of paraprofessionals; and
11. develop a model paraprofessional job description.

**Graduate Training Competencies**. Specific competencies expected of the graduate trainees require individuals to assume more management roles as teachers. Each student will be able to:

1. describe the rationale for the utilization of paraprofessionals in special education;
2. identify the effects of implementing paraprofessional programs on student performance, instructional costs, and special education staffing;
3. demonstrate knowledge of the legal and ethical constraints on the use of paraprofessionals in special education programs;
4. identify and substantiate the important components of a paraprofessional program;
5. describe and define the various roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals in special education;
6. describe the roles of teachers in special education in relationship to the utilization of paraprofessionals;
7. compare and contrast the different roles and responsibilities of teachers and paraprofessionals in the following areas: assessment/data collection, program planning, setting goals for students, managing behavior, and teaching lessons;
8. develop and implement both preservice and inservice training programs for paraprofessional. (Essential skills include conducting needs assessment, establishing appropriate competencies, designing training activities, and evaluating the effectiveness of the training);
9. develop and implement procedures for establishing a paraprofessional program including the development of selection criteria, job description, interview and selection procedures and orientation activities;

10. manage paraprofessionals, using of supervisory techniques, communication of assignments and duties to paraprofessionals, appropriate feedback on paraprofessional performance, the implementation of ongoing skill development programs, and the evaluation of paraprofessional performance;
11. describe methods for evaluating the performance of paraprofessionals, including the identification and employment of dependent measures in the formative and summative evaluation of paraprofessional programs.

## Training Methodology

Differing levels of training are provided at the undergraduate and graduate levels. A short introductory unit has been developed for delivery as part of existing undergraduate methods courses. A more complete coverage of the topic is provided through a graduate course designed to meet the needs of working teachers and administrators who wish to improve paraprofessional programs.

### Classroom Instruction

Undergraduate students receive a six hour unit of didactic instruction which provides background on the roles of paraprofessionals, the legal and ethical issues in the use of the paraprofessional in the classroom, and guidelines on how to supervise and evaluate paraprofessionals. Emphasis in the undergraduate instruction is on raising awareness of the importance of the role of the paraprofessionals and on identification of issues which are essential to the proper and effective utilization of paraprofessionals. Activities within the unit include a slide tape presentation, lecture, role playing, demonstrations, problem solving sessions and discussion .

The graduate training program is designed to provide participants with an advanced level of knowledge concerning the practical and theoretical issues involved in the use of paraprofessionals. In addition, the training program is designed to provide schools within the State of Nebraska with personnel who will assume leadership roles in the development and delivery of training programs for paraprofessionals. The graduate course is designed

to be delivered in a two semester credit hours (approximately 35 -40 hours of classroom instruction). Where possible alternative models are provided and discussed. Emphasis is placed on skills in developing school policies, and training programs which reflect local issues and needs rather than on the delivery of a set curriculum. Participants are exposed to lectures, group problem solving activities, discussions, and demonstrations of training and supervision techniques. A structured course has been an effective means of providing staff development to currently employed teachers and administrators because of the additional requirements and accountability of a more traditional classroom approach and because of the extended exposure and follow-up involved in completing the course over a one year time span.

**Practicum Activities**

Undergraduate students participate in observational practicums as part of their methods courses. The paraprofessional unit provides practicum activities through which students observe paraprofessionals and their supervisors in special education settings, interview paraprofessionals and special education teachers, and critique the utilization of paraprofessionals with handicapped students.

Graduate training programs also include practicum activities as well as formal instruction. Practicum experiences are designed to provide practical application of the information addressed in formal course work. Emphasis is on participant development of plans and activities which can be utilized in the school setting following the completion of the course. When possible participants have utilized existing school procedures as the basis for final plans. Practicum activities include the development and application of a) school policies relating to paraprofessional use, b) paraprofessional job descriptions, c) training activities, and d) evaluation of paraprofessional performance. The practicum includes actual needs assessment, planning, delivery and evaluation activities with paraprofessionals in participating school districts. Participation and feedback from local school administrators is strongly recommended as part of practicum activities.

**Instructional Materials**

A number of materials and handouts have been developed to support instruction in both the undergraduate and graduate instruction. Materials include a state of the art survey of utilization of paraprofessionals in Nebraska, a guide for utilization of paraprofessionals, a task force report on issues in the use of paraprofessionals, and a collection of resources for establishing school policies and procedures regarding paraprofessional use. In addition an extensive (300+) bibliography of articles, books and materials has been collected and made available to participants during the development of their project.

**Evaluation of Student Performance**

A number of strategies are employed to measure the effectiveness of the instruction. Undergraduate and graduate instruction is begun with a pretest activity. The pretest provides both an indication of current knowledge level and provides an orientation to the types of questions to be addressed during instruction. At the undergraduate level the students are also asked to write an hypothetical job description for a paraprofessional in their projected type of special education setting. The job description provides the opportunity for the student to demonstrate knowledge of the rationale for the position, appropriate roles for the paraprofessionals, selection criteria, training requirements, supervision guidelines, evaluation procedures, and other school policies related to paraprofessionals.

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